

Introductory Essay: Overview of Sikh History (1996, OWR)

12th to 15th Century
Sant Tradition in North India

Baba Farid (1173-1266)
Namdev (1270-1350)
Ramanand (c.1400)
Kabir (c.1440-1518)
Ravidas (c.1500)

Turko-Afghan Rule
Delhi Sultanate
(1206-1555)

15th Century
Foundation of the Sikh Panth
16th Century

1. Guru Nanak
(1469-1539)

Udasis: Sri Chand
(1494-1629)

Mughal Rulers
& Governors
Babur
(1526-30)
Humayun
(1530-1556)

Evolution of the Sikh Panth

2. Guru Angad
(1504-1552)

3. G. Amar Das
(1479-1574)

4. Guru Ram Das
(1534-1581)

Manjis

Masands

Akbar
(1556-1605)

5. Guru Arjan*
(1563-1606)

Minas: Prithi Chand
(1558-1618)

Jahangir
(1605-27)

17th Century
Transformation of the Sikh Panth
Martyrdom
and
Militancy

6. G. Hargobind
(1595-1644)

Dhir Malias: Dhir
Mal (1627-1677)

Shah Jahan
(1627-1658)

7. Guru Har Rai
(1630-1661)

Ram Raiyas: Ram
Rai (1646-1687)

8. G. Har Krishan
(1656-1664)

9. G. Tegh Bahadur*
(1621-1675)

Nirmalas

Aurangzeb
(1658-1707)
Bahadar Shah
(1707-12)
Abdus Samad Khan
(1715-1720)
Zakriya Kahn (1726)
Seige of Anandpur

Martyrdom and Militancy

Institution of the Khalsa (1699)
and Social Revolt
18th Century

10. G. Gobind Singh
(1666-1708)

Khalsa Singhs
(1699)

Heroic Period

Rise of the Misls

Maharaja Ranjit Singh's (1780-1839)
Lahore Kingdom
19th Century

Bandai Sikhs:
Banda Bahadur
(1670-1716)

Tat Khalsa:
Mata Sundari

Akalis (later:
Nihangs)

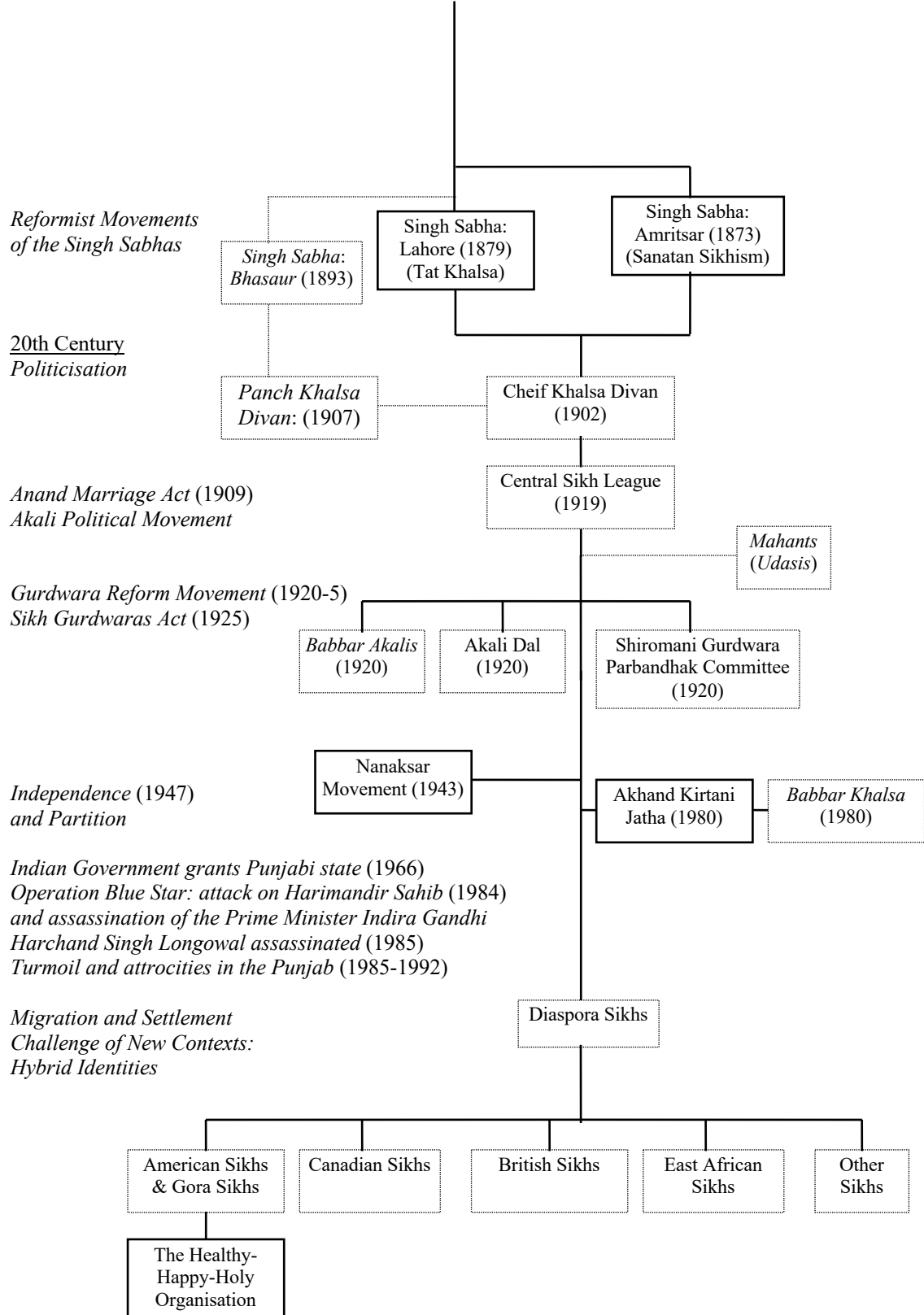
Ahmad Shah Abdali
(1722-72)

Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-46 & 1848-49)
Annexation: British Panjab (1849)

Revivalist movements

Nirankaris:
Baba Dayal
(1783-1855)

Namdharis:
Balak Singh
(1799-1862)



* Sikh Guru Martyrs.

Explanation of the Chart and Introduction

The chart shows the historical unfoldment (from top to bottom) of the various groups directly related to the formation of the Sikh religion. There are key periods in Sikh history that will be used to aid comprehension of the overall chart. To this end, respective centuries and explanatory notes are indicated down the left hand side of the chart. The dotted blocks show a number of things: either the block group is of suspect or ambiguous status with regard to the orthodox view of Sikh identity and history, or they reflect overtly political (and so not religious) movements and groups, but have been shown due to their importance in the formation of what is today understood as Sikhism. Furthermore the dotted boxes do not have an entry assigned to them. The dotted lines similarly reflect an ambiguous or contentious relationship with orthodoxy.

All full blocks do have an entry assigned to them. The Guru period from (Guru Nanak down to Guru Gobind Singh) has been divided into three blocks, separating the ten Gurus into three periods and so three entries to counter repetition. The following is a discussion of how the various blocks (dotted and full) relate to each other in a brief overview of the development and growth of Sikhism as the Sikh Panth. (*Panth* refers to a group of people that follow a certain religious leader or Guru, hence the term Nanak-*panthi*; those that believe in and follow Nanak and his teachings). Each actual entry of a full block will be highlighted in bold type.

The first entry begins in the 15th century with the **Foundation of the Sikh Panth** by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in North India. Nanak's times were relatively peaceful and active with various religious practices. There were three main predispositions to Nanak's religious ideas: those from the Hindu Vaishnava devotees, Nath Yogis and Siddhas (some of Buddhist background), and the Muslim Sufis. However Nanak criticised the hypocritical religious practice of the aforementioned wherever he saw external ritualism replace true inner meditation, contemplation and devotion. There were many poet-saints before and after Nanak that preached a similar message of loving devotion to the Divine (*Bhakti* in Hindi/*Bhagti* in Panjabi). These can be divided into two main groups of which Nanak belongs to the latter: those that worshipped the Supreme Being in a particular form (*sagun*), and those that were devoted to the Absolute Being beyond all form (*nirgun*). The first block on the chart represents the main *nirguni sants* of North India from a Sikh point of view. This is because these five poet-saints have some of their hymns included in the Sikh sacred scripture, wherein Kabir makes the largest contribution. Furthermore all are either from a low caste background or are from a different faith - for example Baba Farid was a Muslim Sufi.

Nanak can then be seen as part of a much larger movement. However it is how Nanak responded to his times and what evolved from his thought that eventually signifies the uniqueness of the Sikh faith. Nanak's elder son Sri Chand, not being chosen as the next Guru, founded his own movement known as the ascetic **Udasis**. Before his death Guru Nanak appointed a disciple as his successor. This sees the beginning of the **Evolution of the Sikh Panth**. Four Gurus have been included in this first block and period, Angad, Amar Das, Ram Das and Arjan. The latter continued Nanak's emphasis on composing hymns, and presented, as did Nanak, a particularly coherent form of *Nirguna Bhakti*. The followers of Guru Nanak were called Sikhs (learners or disciples). This group expanded as the popularity of the Gurus and their teachings spread. The third Guru, Amar Das decided to set up *Manjis* (elected representatives of the Guru's teachings) to cater for the now expanding Sikh Panth. These were replaced and/or expanded by Guru Ram Das into the **Masands**, who had greater power to collect offerings made in the Guru's name. Ram Das's son, Prithi Chand, not being chosen as the next Guru, founded another breakaway group which contested the appointment of Guru Arjan and Guru Hargobind. His group were labelled the **Minas** ('dissemblers'). The evolution of the Sikh Panth takes a decisive turn with Arjan the fifth Guru. Arjan compiled and organised the Adi Granth. The Sikhs had now their own sacred scripture further enriching their identity beyond the simply Hindu and Muslim. Times were becoming increasingly dangerous. The Sikhs, now visibly a separate people almost formed their own state organisation within the larger imposed state of the ruling Mughals. The start of the 17th century saw the beginning of a transformation of the Sikh Panth, initiated with the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606. This is the time during which the Panth began to change: from a previously passive existence to an increasingly unique and militant one, due to the changed social situation of Islamic (Mughal and Afghan) oppression and persecution.

The **Transformation of the Sikh Panth** thus began with Arjan, accelerated with the martyrdom of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, and reached a resolution with Guru Gobind Singh. Now Sikhs were not only urged to be saints but soldiers as well. The very end of the 17th century witnessed the most important juncture and transformation in Sikh history when Guru Gobind Singh instituted the militant Khalsa Order - which aimed to defend the right to practice one's own religion by upholding the principle of religious freedom for all. In creating this Order he transformed some of the Sikh Panth into **Khalsa Singhs**. The dissemblers, **Dhir Mal** and **Ram Rai** again contested the appointees of the Gurus, and thus assumed their own 'Guruship'. Due to their marginal importance, the Minas, Masands, Dhir Malias and the Ram Raiyas have all been allocated one entry.

The eighteenth century, saw the evolution of various Khalsa groups which fought the Mughals and Afghans for most of the century. These were the **Bandai Sikhs**, the **Tat Khalsa** and the **Akalis** (or as they are later known, **Nihangs**). The Tat Khalsa of Mata Sundari (Gobind's widow) represented the orthodox Sikhs of the Khalsa who disagreed with some of the reforms proposed by Banda Singh Bahadur - a Sikh favoured by Guru Gobind Singh. Yet this group is not given an entry because they are not markedly different from the Khalsa Singhs (hence their dotted block). At this time Muslim persecution increased and the Sikh faith was outlawed; the penalty of being a Sikh who did not convert to Islam, was death. This made some Sikhs revert to anonymity by adopting a Hindu appearance; and it drove others, especially the Khalsa, into the forests on horseback - where they regrouped and prepared for war. These army groups were known as *Misals*. Current at this time, according to tradition, were the **Nirmalas** (commissioned scholars) who, along with the Udasis, took over the Gurdwaras and main Sikh centres to preach the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. The end of the 18th century culminates with the victory of the Khalsa and the short reign of Ranjit Singh as the Maharaja of an undivided Panjab.

The early nineteenth century saw the first revivalist movements. The **Nirankari** and the **Namdhari** movements. These operated at a complex time after the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-6 and 1848-9), which saw the British annexation of the Panjab and the establishment of Imperial Rule. However this period is immediately followed by the reformist movements of the Singh Sabhas. At this juncture, of massive social change and interaction with new technology of Colonial administration, the idea and contest for *orthodoxy* and *communal/religious identity* arose. The inclusivist and conservative **Singh Sabha of Amritsar** (founded in 1873) which largely constituted of Sanatan Sikhs, came to be threatened, and eventually marginalised by the more radical and exclusivist **Singh Sabha of Lahore** (founded in 1879) which consisted of Tat Khalsa Singhs. Under this period Sikhs were urged to perceive themselves as a distinct people with a distinct religion. The **Singh Sabha of Bhasaur**, which was founded in 1893, represented an extreme fundamentalist position of this separatist view. This Singh Sabha activity led to the formation, and to a certain extent, invention of *Sikhism*, (since Sikhs had no separate religious *rites de passage* for birth, naming, marriage and death) all of which had to be skilfully created and grafted onto the Guru's teachings. This was done, however, by taking the lead from some of the changes brought about by the Gurus themselves.

Thus the idea of an orthodox *Sikhism* is a retrospective, exclusivist interpretation and cultural creation of the Singh Sabha period which has only in the last century made the Khalsa Singh the orthodoxy. This creation of an orthodox Sikh grew hand in hand with the colonial (British) presence, and it has been (unsuccessfully) contested, by the various groups who can be collectively termed *Sahajadhari* or Sanatan Sikhs, (including Nirmalas, Udasis, Nirankaris, and Namdharis). This, therefore explains why some lines on the chart are dotted and others are not, for we have shown the orthodox view in full lines and blocks. From the now orthodox Singh Sabha (Tat Khalsa's) point of view, the dotted lines are seen as not properly Sikh - whereas previous to the Singh Sabha time some, if not all, of these groups seemed to exist unquestionably as Sikh, as various census reports show.

The bottom part of the of the chart reveals the increasing political tendency in Sikh orthodox activity in the 20th century. These political groups have been shown on the chart because politics is seen by the Orthodox Khalsa Singhs to be within the realm of a religious life. However since these groups are not actually religious movements they will not be given separate entries. Their history is very briefly given here to aid the understanding of their place in Sikhism's overall picture.

To reconcile the differences between the Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa Singhs the *Chief Khalsa Divan* was founded in 1902. This only worked superficially for about eighteen years, during

which it was harangued by a development from the *Bhasaur Singh Sabha*, called the *Panch Khalsa Divan* (founded in 1907).

During the warring years of the eighteenth century many of the Sikh shrines were cared for by the Nirmalas and Udasis later known as the *Mahants*. With the rise of the newly defined orthodoxy, these were seen not to be (Tat Khalsa) Sikh and so unsuitable to govern Sikh Gurdwaras. However wresting control from them, with their colonial backing, proved a costly struggle. The newly formed *Central Sikh League* (founded in 1919) decided to create two new institutions in 1920 to remedy this affair: the (Shiromani) *Akali Dal* and the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (S.G.P.C.). These were specifically created to address certain issues that had arisen within the Panth. The major point of political and religious contention culminated in, what is now called, the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-1925). This ultimately led to the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925, and was simultaneously a non-violent struggle against the British Government; many of the Khalsa Singh reformers joined in spirit and practice with Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) movement for independence. [Gandhi wrote that the Act of 1925 was the "first decisive battle for India's freedom won"]. However there was also the revolutionary and violent action of the *Babbar Akali Jatha* which undertook a campaign of political murders for the fight for independence.

Once Independence had been won, the Partition (between India and Pakistan) left a Panjab state with a Hindu majority. Thus most of the political policies turned to securing a smaller Panjabi *Suba* (state), wherein the majority would be Sikh. This was eventually achieved in 1966. However this did not result with a ruling Akali party and with the unfulfilled promises of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1973, the situation in the Panjab worsened. In 1984 the Government Army stormed the Harimandir Sahib (The Golden Temple) and killed the militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranvale. The concomitant assassination of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, by her own Sikh bodyguards, seemed to be based on avenging this desecration and murder. This spiralled into the mass killings of Sikhs in the Delhi riots. Furthermore an agreement signed by the new Prime Minister (Rajiv Gandhi) and Harchand Singh Longowal in 1983 remains unfulfilled. This leaves the control, regained by the Government in 1992, and the time to the present, filled with discontent, for the majority of Panjabi Sikhs.

The last groups have all emerged out of this political confusion as fighters of it or as independent movements within it. At this time certain contemporary movements emerge. The indigenous groups include the *Bhai Randhir Singh da Jatha*, its development into the **Akhand Kirtani Jatha**, and its extremist offshoot of the *Babbar Khalsa*. This latter group killed many Sant Nirankaris (who were a break-away movement from the original Nirankaris), and the less politically motivated groups of the **Nanaksar Movement**.

The **Diaspora Sikhs** form a number of groups shown on the chart as: *American Sikhs and Gora Sikhs* (white converts), *Canadian Sikhs*, *British Sikhs*, *East African Sikhs*, and *Other Sikhs* (which includes areas of settlement in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Hong Kong, Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia. One religious movement emerges out of the Diaspora of North America, that of **The Happy-Healthy-Holy Organisation**. Because there is little research available on this movement the entry is rather short. The Diaspora communities do not form religious movements of their own and are usually distinct by caste (such as the *Ramgarhia*, *Ramdasia*, *Ahluvalia*, *Mazhabi* etc.)

A note on the "Adherents section" of all entries. The actual population of the various groups are problematic for a number of reasons:

i) An orthodox view of who a Sikh is, was late to develop, and when it did previous groups originally held as Sikh were suddenly put into an ambiguous and dubious position. In fact the Tat Khalsa Singh Sabha's reinterpretation of the Sikh tradition eliminated a variety of legitimate, often Sanatan, religious identities: *Sahajdharis*, *Nanak-panthis*, *Nirmalas*, *Udasis*, *Nihangs*, *Nirankaris*, *Namdharis*, *Nanaksaris*, all were reinterpreted as either Sanatan/Hindu and so excluded or critically questioned for not conforming to the Tat Khalsa norms and disciplines. Thus, the greatest problem for population numbers came from Sikh people's own ambivalence about their identity.

ii) Furthermore, the fact that previous to the Singh Sabha and colonial rule, multiple identities were common and acceptable; one could be a *Hindu Nanak-panthi* (Hindu-Sikh) as well as a *Sikh Sahajdhari* (Sikh Nanak-panthi), or a *Sikh Keshdhari* (Gobind Singh) as well as a *Hindu Gobind Singhi*. [See the *Census of India*, 1881-1931, Punjab, vol.1 (Tumba, Sweden, International Documentation Centre 1964, microfiche) cited in, Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, University of California Press, London 1985, p.113.] Thus, in the 1891 census, under the category 'Hindu' there are many Sikh groups including 'Sikh' itself: *Akali*, *Arjan Singh Guru*, *Guru Gobind Singhi*, *Udasi*, *Kuka*, *Amardasi*, *Angad Guru*, *Anandpuria*, *Nirmala*, *Sikh*, *Tegh Bahadur Guru*. (*Census of India*, 1891, Vol.XX, and vol.XXI. *The Punjab and its Feudatories*, by E.D. Maclagan, Part II and III, Calcutta, 1892, pp.826-9 and pp.572-3.)

iii) These fluid and dual religious boundaries, with their several overlapping identities caused great problems for the early British census approach - which initially did not even see 'religion' as a meaningful category for enumeration. The 1901 census only counted those Sikhs that were *Keshdhari* (with uncut hair), obviously too narrow a definition. (See R.G. Fox above, p.112.) These classifications were made as observations; only by the 1911 census were people given the freedom to define their own religious identity (R.G. Fox, p.112). Thus most of our groups are either before the census reports or, when they have been conducted, are quite unreliable due to confused, competing, joint and contradictory definitions. From the Tat Khalsa Singh Sabha's orthodox position the only Sikh is a *Khalsa Singh*, but this only came into currency after the turn of the twentieth century. Previous to this many Sikhs of various kinds and degrees existed as 'Sikh' unchallenged by any one single group.

In the 1991 census a total of 16,259,744 Sikhs is given (excluding the Jammu and Kashmir areas where the census was not held), (Dr M. Vijayanunni, *Census of India* 1991, Series - 1 INDIA, paper of 1 of 1995 *Religion*, p.3-5.). Thus Sikh populations world-wide can only be estimates. Latest research indicates that this number is between 16 to 17 million, with over a million in Diaspora, with significant minorities in the UK, America and Canada. (See W.H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism, Religions, Philosophies, and Movements No. 5*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, M., & London, 1995).